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STATE FOR D (FRITZ), EAP/FO, AND EAP/ANP
NSC FOR VICTOR CHA
SECDEF FOR OSD/ISD LIZ PHU
PACOM FOR J01E/J2/J233/J5/SJFHQ

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SUBJECT: DEATH OF MAORI INFANTS BRINGS DEBATE & DISCORD

Summary

1. (SBU) The brutal deaths of twin Maori babies who lived in a house with several benefit recipients has sparked nationwide debate over the actions of the family. It has also highlighted the growing problem of welfare dependency, drug and alcohol addiction and child neglect within the Maori community. Even Maori leaders and commentators are divided over how best to address the problems raised by the case. The Maori Party co-leader has seen his status with the public rise as a result of his performance in the wake of the tragic deaths. End Summary

The case

2. (SBU) Three-month-old Auckland twins Chris and Cru Kahui died after being brought to a hospital suffering brain damage. One of the 11-week-old infants also had a broken thigh bone. Immediately after the deaths, the family was roundly accused of stonewalling police investigations by arguing that they needed time to grieve before talking to police. Some New Zealanders, both Maori and non-Maori, are outraged at what they see as the family hiding behind a traditional Maori grieving custom. Almost three weeks after the killings, the family still has not revealed to investigators who is responsible for the deaths and to date no arrests have been made. Police are defending their handling of the investigation, stating that they cannot be rushed into a result which will not stand up in court. Despite this, some politicians believe that the case needs to move forward expeditiously and the next step should be arrests for murder and obstruction of justice.

Issues thrown up from case divides Maori body politic

3. (SBU) Although Maori political leadership all agree that the family must take responsibility for the deaths, schisms have surfaced among them over how best to address the underlying problems the case revealed. Urban Maori leader (and former MP) John Tamihere argues that Maori social service providers have to contend daily with social problems similar to those of the Kahuis. He proposes that benefits should be paid to Maori agencies which would then pay beneficiaries' essential household bills. Benefits would be cut to those refusing services such as family support or addiction treatment. Tamihere also accuses Maori Party co-leader, Dr. Pita Sharples, of being blind to the "world of urban Maori degradation."

¶4. (SBU) Sharples' fellow party co-leader, Tariana Turia maintains that Maori must be involved in welfare decision-making rather than others making decisions for them. Alan Duff, a prominent writer on urban Maori and an outspoken critic of the "culture of violence" within Maoridom, welcomed tighter control of welfare payments but believes that Tamihere's proposal is not the answer. Green Party Maori issues spokeswoman Metiria Turei labeled the Proposal as a ridiculous knee-jerk reaction to an extreme case of beneficiary abuse. Prime Minister Helen Clark also dismissed the proposal.

Sharples profile grows in wake of deaths

¶5. (SBU) In contrast to the other commentators, Sharples' open indignation at the actions of the Kahui family and his efforts to address social problems within Maori have broadened his political appeal. He has visited with the family and urged their cooperation with police. Sharples has also laid bare his own experiences as an abused child. While some have accused him of political profiteering, most observers have been very positive about his approach. One journalist said that when he talked about the Kahui case Sharples was 'the brown man saying what white people were thinking'. He has even been called the 'Kaumatua' (male tribal elder) of the nation. Whether Sharples newly elevated appeal translates into a political evolution for Maori (or himself) remains to be seen. But at the very least his response has ignited a national debate about the best way to deal with Maori social problems.
McCormick